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Historical Commentary

“Promised Land” or Armageddon? History, Survivalists, and the Aryan Nations in the Pacific Northwest

by Eckard Toy

The announcement in the mail was terse, its implications disturbing. It was a reminder that the Aryan Nations Congress would meet at Hayden Lake, Idaho, on July 12 and 13, 1986, to declare a “territorial sanctuary” and to form “a provisional government” for the “Reestablishment of a White Sovereign State in America.” The leaders of several loosely aligned extremist groups were scheduled to attend the Congress, which would be their first joint summer meeting at Hayden Lake since the trial in Seattle of members of The Order. That lengthy and highly publicized trial drew to a close last spring when members of The Order were convicted of federal racketeering and conspiracy charges involving robbery and murder. Federal prosecutors had outlined a frightening scenario about plans for a revolution to create a separate racial nation in the Pacific Northwest, and television and newspaper accounts of the trial reinforced an image of neo-Nazis that resembled the widely held stereotype of armed and camouflaged survivalists fleeing civilization.

The announcement by the Aryan Nations, the trial of members of The Order, and the stereotype of the survivalist raise some fundamental questions. Why does the Pacific Northwest appear to be such an attractive place for survivalists and political extremists? Is geographical

isolation the primary reason? Are racial factors important? Does our regional history reveal a basic flaw within the promise of the Promised Land? Or have journalists and the FBI exaggerated the threat posed by organizations like The Order and the Aryan Nations?

Cowboy humorist Will Rogers used to say that all he knew was what he read in the newspapers. If all that most Americans know about history or current events comes from newspapers or, more likely, television, then we truly face a national malaise. The highly commercialized exploitation of historical themes in numerous docudramas on television and in romance and historical novels simply compounds the problem of superficial understanding of history. This general condition is aggravated in regional history by the numerous attempts to impose the symbols and images of the Old West upon the New West.

It was once suggested, only half facetiously, that history is what we remember. Too often, history has become what we choose to remember or what we wish it had been. There are numerous studies by historians about mountain men, frontier individualism, and violence in the West, but novelists, journalists, Hollywood film makers, and politicians have often warped that history beyond recognition. News accounts about the trial and escape from prison of Claude

Lafayette Dallas, Jr., in Idaho and of the trials of Don Nichols and his son in Montana should remind us about how difficult it is to avoid sensationalism and to separate romanticized notions about the mountain man and the lone cowboy from the stereotype of the militant survivalist.

But these journalistic and artistic abuses of history are relatively benign when compared with the distorted and falsified version of history held by some extremist groups. Although their memberships are small and their immediate threat to public order exaggerated, groups like the Aryan Nations and its allies constitute a dangerous social malignancy. Their potential for violence is real, and they proclaim a “theology,” thus a view of history, that denies democracy and equates race with religion.

If journalists indulge in sensationalism and sometimes reveal an abysmal ignorance of history, historians can be criticized for rarely studying the sources and ideas of survivalism and organized racism in the West. One result of this neglect is a blurring of the distinctions that separate many survivalists from the political extremists. Survivalists and groups like the Aryan Nations are separate subcultures with many similarities. Survivalists may place more emphasis on self-reliance and less on racialist ideology, but members of these two subcultures thrive on

secrecy and sometimes share training programs and technology. They often share an apocalyptic belief about the inevitability of nuclear war, economic collapse, and social conflict, all of which contribute to an underlying potential for violent, antisocial behavior.

But these similarities should not obscure some significant differences. Survivalists belong to many ideological camps; not all of them are confirmed loners. Moreover, their apparent uniformity breaks down even more when it comes to establishing their "retreat" or haven. The late survivalist guru, Mel Tappan, opposed group retreats, emphasizing that "artificial communities have a tendency not to work out." He sought self-sufficiency and recommended a family retreat or permanent relocation near a rural community "at least a tank of gasoline removed from any large city." Other survivalists argue that it is not necessary to have a rural retreat, emphasizing instead the value of maintaining connections with urban society. Survivalist theorist Kurt Saxon, who embraces a militant individualism, rejects both of these alternatives. Saxon calls rural retreats an anachronism and urban survivalism a contradiction in terms.

When these survivalist assumptions and practices are blended with racial nationalism, the result is a perversion of traditional western history. While there has been a persistent strain of resistance in the West to federal authority, there have been few calls for outright political autonomy. Times have changed. The demand by the Aryan Nations Congress for an independent "racial nation" in the Pacific Northwest comes most insistently from "Pastor" Robert E. Miles of the Mountain Church of Cohoctah, Michigan, and "Pastor" Richard G. Butler of the Church of Jesus Christ Christian of the Aryan Nations in Hayden Lake, Idaho.

Motivated by their racial beliefs, they demand land at the risk of violence. "All we heretics ask for," Miles explained in his spring 1985 newsletter, "is the northwestern

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Announcement of 1984 International Congress of Aryan Nations

Courtesy of the author

part of the USA." Why the Pacific Northwest? "It has all we want," Miles asserts: "Space that is not jammed already with hostiles, indifferents or aliens. It has a sea coast. It has mountains. It has water. It has land areas yet to be developed. It has a border which is definable. It has the warmth of the temperate zones but the cold which our Folk require in order to thrive." Calling it a "geographical tithe" to the whites, Miles argues that the small racial enclave of the Aryan Nations in Idaho should be expanded to include the "sparcely [sic] populated" states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. The Pacific Northwest would become, as Miles describes the possibilities, "A reservation? A refuge? A sanctuary for our Folk?" He has even given a name to this new entity: the "Mountain Republic of North America." In his spring 1986

newsletter, Miles encouraged his readers to prepare their families for "the out-trek" to this "new White Republic" in the Pacific Northwest.

No matter how impossible or deplorable this particular solution might be for America's racial problems, the demand for an autonomous racial state raises interesting questions about the contradictory legacies of the American frontier and the Exodus story of a chosen people. The search for a social or religious haven or promised land is rooted deeply in American history. The Pilgrim and Puritan experiences, the Mormon exodus, and black nationalist demands for a separate state in the South are examples of movements for separation and homogeneity based on religion or race. And, beyond its utopian vision, the biblical account of the Exodus is also a cautionary tale about conformity and violence. Moses

purged the spiritually impure, thus providing a lesson for the faithful and carrying the principle of self-selection to a logical conclusion.

American history provides numerous examples of this connection between social purification and national regeneration. New England colonists, proclaiming themselves a chosen people, justified expulsion of the Indians and portrayed North America as the New Eden. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the exploration and acquisition of the Pacific Northwest renewed the national promise in a place far distant from the corrupting influences of slavery, immigration, Catholicism, and the factory. The spirit of Manifest Destiny reinforced the opinion expressed by the *Edinburgh Review* in 1843 that Oregon was "the last corner on earth left free for the occupation of a civilized race." Perhaps that assumption explains, at least in part, what happened in the Pacific Northwest to the Indians and the Chinese during the nineteenth century and to the Japanese during the twentieth century, and it may also help to explain why the laws and constitution of Oregon initially banned not only slavery but also free blacks. These earlier examples of self-selection provide a historical context for examining the ideas of the Aryan Nations, and "Pastor" Richard G. Butler provides the key to understanding them.

Butler, who had previously been associated with the Christian Defense League, the Posse Comitatus, and the Christ Identity movement in California, moved to Hayden Lake in the mid 1970s. He soon organized the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, tracing its origins to the Christ Identity faith and proclaiming as its central principle "Christianity for the Aryan is race—and race is Christianity." From his small compound in rural Idaho, Butler preaches the need for a racial haven as a preliminary step in the "regeneration, restoration" of the racial line of Adam. Aryan Nations member Roy B. Mansker reinforced this theme in an essay in the group's magazine *Calling Our Nation* when he urged his fellow



Cross-burning ceremony at the Aryan Nations compound, Hayden Lake, Idaho, July 1983

Steve Thompson, Spokesman-Review/Chronicle, Spokane, Washington

racialists to "look at the great Northwest and see far beyond to the great day of Yahweh. . . ."

Combining appeals to racial consciousness with the historical symbolism of Viking and Teutonic warriors and Confederate soldiers, Butler contends that "the Aryan Christian movement must ultimately sweep all the Aryan peoples on earth." These historical symbols provide a direct link between the Nazi ideology of Adolf Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. Butler concedes that "victory cannot be had without contest"; thus his appeal to racial militancy extends beyond rhetoric to what C. Wright Mills once called "crackpot realism." The Aryan "warrior's" commitment to defense of his race goes beyond the survivalist's desire to protect his life and property. In 1983, Louis Beam, a Texas Klansman and Ambassador-at-Large for the Aryan Nations, warned: "Out of the West comes a wind, and it is the wind of revolution." Is it any wonder that some younger members of Butler's church were instrumental in founding The Order or Bruder Schweigen, as many of its sympathizers prefer to call it?

The martyrdom of Robert Mathews on Whidbey Island in the fall of 1984 should provide ample proof of the narrow gap between belief and action. In a final declaration supposedly written shortly before his death, the founder

of The Order stated: "A secret war has been developing for the last year between the regime in Washington and an ever growing number of White people who are determined to regain what OUR forefathers discovered, explored, conquered, settled, built, and died for."

This statement reveals the challenge historians face in studying political extremism. Secrecy is a barrier, and the ideas are abominable. But if journalists deserve criticism for their tendency to sensationalize the eccentric and the extreme, historians should be chided for ignoring or minimizing the influence of these groups. Although it can be a melancholy task to study the social and political effluvia of America's past and present, it is a task worth doing. But it also requires that we, as historians, pierce the romantic notions and unrealistic perceptions about the history of the West. At the very least, we would gain a better understanding about the historical evolution of conflict, attitudes toward minorities, and social isolation in the West. Perhaps we might even move closer to achieving the Promised Land that is such a constant and yet elusive part of the historical legacy of the West. ECKARD TOY, a specialist in the history of the radical right in the twentieth century West, teaches history at Oregon State University at Corvallis.